Chapter 7

Conclusion

The point of departure for the current study was several research questions. Firstly, this book investigated whether different kinds of mouth actions that have been generally distinguished in sign linguistic literature can be found in ISL. Secondly, I elaborated on the question whether these different kinds of mouth actions are used systematically while in a second step trying to determine their respective functions. Finally, the correlation of different kinds of mouth actions with certain sociolinguistic (gender, age) and linguistic (word class) factors was discussed.

One of the results of this investigation is that the different kinds of mouth actions that have been postulated in the literature can also be distinguished for ISL. A part from the traditional dichotomy of mouth gestures and mouthings that is described in the literature, a more fine-grained typology of mouthings and mouth gestures could be achieved. With respect to mouthings, six distinct types with different functions on the linguistic as well as metalinguistic level, could be established. At first glance, the findings from the SOI seem to support the general claim that mouthings tend to be semantically redundant. However, I suggest that mouthings are rather semantically congruent with a certain manual sign. This acknowledges the fact that all mouthings fulfill certain functions that are relevant for the linguistic setup of a sign or the discourse as a whole. Mouthings are thus in some cases integral parts of signs and might in other cases function as metalinguistic remarks in narratives or as prosodic linkers, especially between pronouns/indeces and content signs. This supports Boyes Braem (2001) and Bank et al.’s (2011) claims that for some signs, mouthings are firmly established parts of the respective signs.94 Bank and colleagues also suggest that some NGT mouthings might be the result of congruent lexicalization. This could not be proven however, as they only looked at signs in isolation. The current study on ISL sustains the statement that mouthings might fulfill functions that exceed purely lexical purposes and are related to narrative and/or prosodic structure. However, the amount of variation found among mouthings for one sign in ISL (and other sign languages such as NGT) hints at the fact that in many cases mouthings are not lexically determined. This is further substantiated by the rarity of homonyms distinguished by mouthings in ISL and is also in line with Ebbinghaus and Heßmann (2001) who, despite acknowledging
the importance for mouthings and the oral-aural modality for sign language structures, do not claim lexical determinacy of mouthings (cf. chapter 3.2.3).

Concerning mouth gestures, it was found that there are three distinct types, namely semantically empty, adverbial and enacting mouth gestures. The latter two types are often iconic in nature and constitute a lexical class of its own, as was shown in chapter 6.2.4. Having established these different types of mouth actions and their functions, it became clear that they are used systematically in order to fulfill said functions. Consequently, they are equally functionally important for the linguistic structure of ISL, which is in line with earlier findings for other sign languages (cf. chapter 3.2.1). Moreover, it became evident that the variation between mouthings and mouth gestures used with the same manual sign that has been reported for NGT for the first time (Bank et al. 2011), can also be observed in ISL. This was shown in chapter 6.2.3 and will be taken up again below.

In the sociolinguistic part of the analysis, the influence of the factors gender and age, of which gender has been extensively researched for ISL, was investigated. While differences concerning both factors individually were clearly visible, one of the main results of this analysis was the interrelation of both factors. A huge discrepancy between the mouth action behaviour of men and women was visible in that men generally use less mouthings than women. This fact could be related to the differences in education and especially the introduction of the oral education method to the Cabra deaf schools at different points in time. Signers of the oldest age group (age group 3) also used less mouthings than signers of the youngest age group (age group 1). This development towards an increased use of English mouthings in present day ISL could also be traced back to the differences in education just mentioned. Further, a higher degree of ISL/English bilingualism in signers which might ultimately further a more frequent use of mouthings seems to be another explanation. Based on Mohr (2012), it was suggested that a monolingual setting in the traditional sense does not exist for deaf people and that we need to rethink and reformulate sociolinguistic frameworks dealing with language contact and bilingualism accordingly. Finally, the increased use of mouthings along with their specific functions in younger generations hints at a firm integration of these items into the linguistic system of ISL. Especially this development over time suggests that a language change has taken place in ISL. However, this language change does by no means support Keller’s hypothesis that the frequency and importance of mouthings reduces over time as mentioned in chapter 3.2.3. The data clearly refute his claim that mouthings will eventually fall out of use, in describing the opposite development: an increase in the frequency and importance of mouthings in ISL.
The second part of the investigation was concerned with the question of the correlation between mouth actions and word classes or morphological complexity. In a first step, the word classes of ISL, distinguishing syntactic categories and lexical classes were established. These were found by applying a combination of morphological, morphosyntactic and distributional criteria. Semantic and ontological features were only minor in this respect, and applied in a last step in order to establish possible semantic cores for each lexical class. ISL was found to have four distinct syntactic categories and five lexical classes which do not coincide. Consequently, it was found to be a TYPE B language according to Sasse’s (1993a) classification.

Especially the lexical class of verbs proved interesting, as the traditional tripartite division of sign language verbs according to Padden (1988) was found to be inapplicable to the ISL data. In line with earlier studies on ISL, a different distinction into two kinds of verbs, namely full verbs and aktionsart verbs, was established. Finally, the claim that mouth actions might serve as a modality-specific tool for word class recognition in sign languages was followed up on. It was found that mouth actions do not seem to be a useful tool for PoS distinction in ISL as only predicates and the lexical class of verbs can be singled out from the other lexical classes by correlation with different kinds of mouth actions. However, the sub-categorization of the verb class is supported by the analysis of mouth actions. It was observed that a high co-occurrence with mouth gestures reflects a high morphological complexity of a sign whereas a frequent co-occurrence with mouthings mirrors the simpler morphological structure of the respective sign.

Finally, the results from the PoS analysis of the ISL data were situated within the framework of functional linguistic theories and Dik’s (1989) model of functional grammar. It turned out that the model is largely applicable to the ISL data, the only difference being that V predications show a split into bare and (full) predicates in ISL which seems to be modality-dependent and holds true for other sign languages as well. In conclusion, the different types of mouth actions were mapped onto the grammatical model proposed by Dik. Reflecting their heterogeneous nature, the different types of mouth actions were also situated at different places of the model, either as basic terms and predicates, predicate frames, pragmatic functions or formal expression rules.

In conclusion, from a functional linguistic point of view, mouth actions are a linguistically important, indispensable part of ISL that fulfills predestined linguistic and metalinguistic functions. These functions usually cannot be fulfilled by other linguistic means. While this has been undisputed for mouth gestures for a while, it is especially important with respect to
mouthings. Contrary to claims that they are not part of the linguistic system of a sign language and could hence be dispensed with (cf. e.g. Hohenberger & Happ 2001), they have been shown to be fully integrated linguistic material of ISL that is essential for the functioning of the linguistic system as a whole. Referring to the “continuum of mouthings as outcomes of code-blending on the one and fully lexicalized items of a sign language on the other end” mentioned by Bank et al. (2011:251), this book positions mouthings towards the lexicalised end of the scale. This does not deny their origin as a language contact phenomenon and the importance of contact between ISL and spoken English for the development of the phenomenon. However, the oral-aural modality has always been available to signers to a certain extent and played a significant role due to the social development of the majority of deaf children in hearing families. The introduction of oralism and the resulting heightened level of sign and spoken language contact only functioned as an enforcing factor. Linguistic change in this context rather refers to the natural evolution of all languages that can be observed more closely in the case of sign languages as young languages. Gaining more and more diverse functions, the final results of the development that started in the 1940s/50s with the introduction of oralism to the Cabra schools remain to be seen and will be an exciting topic of research for future studies.